

Sighs, Sugar, & Slaves

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CHILDREN OF SÃO TOMÉ?

They were some of the littlest victims of the Expulsion from Spain, those 2,000 Jewish children who were torn from the arms of their parents and exiled to a malaria-infested island located off the coast of West Africa. But they haven't been forgotten. Until today, historians are trying to unravel the mystery of what happened to the children of São Tomé.

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Libi Astaire

They call it "Paradise on Earth," in the tourism brochure. And for the world-weary traveler who really wants to get away from it all, the tiny island of São Tomé, located in the Atlantic Ocean about 150 miles west of mainland Africa and a smidgen north of the equator, is a tropical playground filled with miles and miles of unspoiled beaches and rainforests.

But for a group of Portuguese settlers who were banished there in the year 1493 — a group that included some 2,000 Jewish children, as well as adult convicts and other social outcasts — the island was anything but paradise. Separated from their families, and with little hope of ever returning to their homes, their dreary mission was to turn the forest-covered island into a profitable colony for the Portuguese king.

Amazingly, they succeeded. Within one generation large swaths of land had been cleared, and São Tomé had become the world's largest exporter of sugar. But what happened to the Jewish children? Did any of them manage to escape from their island prison? Or, if they remained in São Tomé, were they able to retain at least some semblance of Yiddishkeit — and leave a trace of their Jewish heritage behind? The truth is that only scattered fragments have been discovered about the children and their fate. But from these fragments we can try to piece together their story.

Do You Know the Way to São Tomé?

I was seriously thinking about asking **Mishpacha** to send me to São Tomé, until I learned two things about the island: malaria is still a danger, and the one European airline that flies there — TAP Portugal — has only one flight to São Tomé a week. That plane makes its way from Lisbon to the Gulf of Guinea early on a Friday morning, lands and refuels at São Tomé's tiny airport before breakfast, and then hurries back to Lisbon so quickly that there is still plenty of time to prepare for Shabbos. Did I really want to stay for a full week in such an isolated place?

The truth is that I probably needn't have worried, provided I took anti-malaria medicine beforehand. Crime is practically nonexistent, perhaps because the local population is so poor that there is little to steal (although they hope to soon become



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very rich since oil deposits were recently discovered off the coast). And even though the country has experienced economic hardships and several coups in the three decades since it gained independence from Portugal in 1975, the approximately 150,000 people who live in São Tomé and the neighboring island that makes up the other half of the country, Príncipe, have a reputation for being polite and friendly.

That politeness and friendliness is perhaps something of a miracle, given the country's often harsh colonial past. A breakdown of São Tomé's main population groups reveals that history in brief: *mestiços*, or mixed-blood persons, are descendants of the early Portuguese colonists and African slaves who were brought to the islands from nearby Benin, Gabon, and Congo during the early years of settlement; *Angolares*, who are thought to be descendants of Angolan slaves; *forros*, descendants of slaves who were freed when slavery was abolished in 1875; and *serviçais*, contract laborers from Angola, Mozambique, and Cape Verde, who live temporarily on the islands.

One group that is noticeably missing is the Portuguese, who left the country en masse when São Tomé e Príncipe gained its independence. However, Portuguese continues to be the official language — even though many of the people speak Forro, a form of Luso-African Creole — and reminders of the island's colonial past can be seen at the plantations that once provided São Tomé with its main sources of income. Some of those plantations are still producing crops of cocoa and coffee today, while a few of them have been converted into upscale hotels. Many of them, though, were deserted after 1909, when the international community boycotted the island's products due to the plantation owners' harsh treatment of their workers, and the rainforests have since reclaimed the once-cultivated land.

There is, of course, another group that is missing from the island's population roll call: Jews. But before we can discover what happened to the Jewish children who were among the island's first settlers, we must recall how they got there



in the first place.

The First Exile: 1492

To the very end, the Jews of Spain prayed for a miracle; perhaps the cruel Edict of Expulsion would be annulled. But when Tisha B'Av arrived and the miracle didn't materialize, about half of Spain's Jews boarded rickety, rat-infested ships and set sail for Italy, the Ottoman Empire, and various ports in Northern Africa. The other half fled to nearby Portugal.

King João II of Portugal didn't open his country's border because he had a kind heart. He was preparing for a war against the Moors and he needed money. He therefore granted permanent residence to some 600 Jewish families who were able to pay a fee of one hundred cruzados. Some thirty craftsmen whose skills could be used in the upcoming campaign were also admitted. The rest — about 100,000 souls — were allowed into the country on the condition that they pay a “transit fee” and leave Portugal within eight months. If they didn't leave, they would become the king's slaves.

When the eight months elapsed, most of the impoverished Spanish Jews were still stuck in Portugal. They were given a brief reprieve in 1494, when Manuel I became the new king and granted the enslaved Spanish Jews their freedom. However, when Manuel decided to marry the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, the Catholic monarchs insisted that he first expel all the Jews from his kingdom.

Manuel was in a dilemma, since the Jews were a source of wealth and skilled labor that

he didn't want to lose. He therefore embarked upon a project that was as cruel as it was ambitious: he forcibly converted all of the Jews living in Portugal, both the Spanish exiles and the native Jewish-Portuguese population. By October of 1497 he was able to announce to his future in-laws, “There are no more Jews in Portugal.”

The Exile to São Tomé

Amid all the heartbreak of those years, one incident was especially poignant. In 1493 King João, anxious to populate and cultivate a recently discovered island off the coast of West Africa, decided to seize some 2,000 Jewish children, whose parents were among the poor Jewish exiles from Spain. After the children were forcibly baptized, they were shipped off to São Tomé.

Samuel Usque, whose family was among the Spanish exiles and who wrote a history called *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel*, described the scene, some fifty years after the event took place (translation by David Raphael, *The Expulsion 1492 Chronicles*):

When the luckless hour arrived for this barbarity to be inflicted, mothers scratched their faces in grief as their babies, less than three years old, were taken from their arms. Honored elders tore their beards when the fruit of their bodies was snatched before their eyes. The fated children raised their piercing cries to heaven as they were mercilessly torn from their beloved parents at such a tender age.

Several women threw themselves at the king's feet, begging for permission to accompany their children; but not even this moved the king's pity. One mother, distraught by this horrible unexampled cruelty, lifted her baby in her arms, and paying no heed to its cries, threw herself from the ship into the heaving sea, and drowned, embracing her only child.

Later historians have charged Usque with being overly dramatic. But the basic facts of the story are confirmed by Rui de Pina, an official chronicler of the Portuguese kings. In his *Chronica d'El Rei Dom João II*, which was completed sometime before 1504, de Pina writes (translation by David Raphael):

In this year of 1493 ... the king gave to Alvaro de Caminha the captaincy of the island of São Tomé of right and inheritance; and as for the Castilian Jews who had not left his kingdom within the assigned date, he ordered that, according to the condition upon their entry, all the boys and young men and girls of the Jews be taken into captivity. After having them all turned into Christians, he sent them to the said island with Alvaro de Caminha, so that by being secluded, they would have reasons for being better Christians, and [the king] would have in this reason for the island to be better populated, which, as a result, culminated in great growth.

What happened to the children when they reached São Tomé? According to Samuel Usque, they were abandoned on the shore, where most of them were either eaten by crocodiles or died of starvation. However, according to Rabbi Yitzchak Abarbanel, who left Spain in 1492 with the exiled Jews and settled in Naples, the children met a very different fate. In his commentary on the Torah, *Shemos 7:28*, he writes:

The king of Portugal forced many children of



WHERE ARE THEY NOW

the Spanish exiles to adopt his faith. He sent them to [Crocodile Island] fourteen years ago, all of them children without any blemish, boys and girls, more than 2,000 souls. They have already multiplied there, and most of the island is inhabited by them. The island is not far from the equator.

Which is the true account, the one written by Rabbi Abarbanel that says the children lived, or the one written by Samuel Usque that says that most of them perished? Could both be right? Or is neither accurate? And how did they know what happened to the children?

To begin our search, we first turn to a Jew from our own times, Professor Moshe Liba, who arrived in São Tomé in the year 1994 not as an exile or a slave, but as Israel's first nonresident ambassador to the modern-day country that is known as São Tomé e Príncipe.

What Do We Know?

In addition to being an Israeli diplomat, Professor Liba is the author or editor of dozens of books and articles. One of them, *Jewish Child Slaves in São Tomé*, is a collection of scholarly articles that were presented at a 1995 international conference on the fate of the Jewish children, which was organized by Professor Liba.

One of the purposes of the conference was to see if scholars could agree on some of the basic facts concerning the children. The problem, of course, is that many of the historical sources present conflicting evidence. As an example, Professor Liba mentions that although there is a general agreement that the children were seized and baptized in the year 1493, there is a question as to how many children were abducted, their ages, and if only boys were seized or also girls.

The consensus seems to be that both boys and girls were abducted. Although Rabbi Shlomo ibn Verga mentions just boys, three other sources mention both boys and girls: the Abarbanel's commentary on *Shemos* 7:28; the last will and testament of Captain Alvaro de Caminha, dated April 24, 1499; and the 1634 diary of a Catholic priest who lived on the island, Padre Rosario Pinto.

How many children were sent into exile? Most sources claim that about 2,000 children were forcibly baptized and put on the boats, along with a motley collection of *degradados* (convicts), priests, soldiers, and sailors. But some sources mention just 600 children. How can this discrepancy be resolved? One possible explanation is provided by Padre Pinto, who wrote that 1,400 children died during the voyage because of "the difficulties of the trip." Thus, out of the original group of 2,000, only 600 children made it to the island alive.

Why did so many of the children perish during the voyage? This raises an additional question about the logistics of transporting so many people at that time. The will and testament of Alvaro de Caminha states that there was food on board for only 1,000 people. Did this mean that the real number of Jewish children sent into



exile was less than 1,000? Or does it mean that the children were cruelly and intentionally left to die of hunger and illness on board the ship? On this issue, Alvaro de Caminha is silent.

The question of the children's ages is important, because it would have had an impact on the ability of the children to retain some vestige of their Judaism in a totally alien environment — and pass on some knowledge of their Jewish heritage to future generations. Again, the historical records vary, but the general consensus is that the children were between the ages of two and eight.

Even though we would like to believe that these little children stubbornly clung to their Jewish faith, is there any evidence? When I posed this question to Professor Liba during a phone interview, he fairly bristled with indignation.

"The children who were sent to São Tomé were small children who were abducted from their parents, put on a ship, and sent to a place that had no access to the outside world. They were put in a Christian school and educated by priests with the goal of turning them into Catholics. They remained slaves, who were not allowed to marry among themselves. Instead, they were forced to intermarry with the African slaves who were also brought to the island, as part of the King of Portugal's plan to create a new race on the island, which was intended to

be a prosperous colony to fill the king's coffers.

"These children were not Anusim, at least not in the sense that we usually use the term, which is to refer to Jews from either Spain or Portugal who were forced to become Christians. The Anusim had their families and their communal structure. They had women who passed down their traditions from mother to daughter. They also had some written documents, although not many, which they passed down from one generation to the next. But this was not the case with the children who were sent to São Tomé. Therefore it is nonsense to speak about the children hanging on to their Yiddishkeit, or about there being any remnants of synagogues or traces of Jewish customs on the island. It makes me want to cry when I hear people speak such nonsense."

It's a harsh answer, and when I hang up the phone I refuse to accept it. But my refusal doesn't stem from the fact that when I'm not writing articles for *Mishpacha*, I'm writing historical novels. It's because I happen to know, from my research, that São Tomé wasn't as isolated as Professor Liba has suggested.

History Sweet and Sour

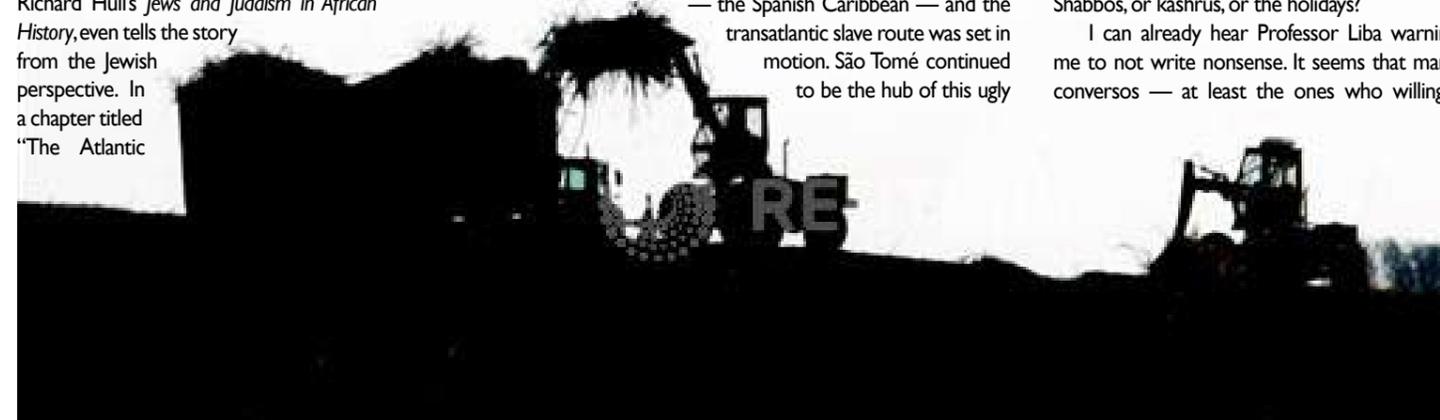
If the story of the children exiled to São Tomé is only a footnote in historical accounts, the story of Europe's attempted colonization of the African continent is the subject of numerous books and scholarly articles. One of them, Richard Hull's *Jews and Judaism in African History*, even tells the story from the Jewish perspective. In a chapter titled "The Atlantic

Slave Trade," Hull, a professor of African history at New York University, discusses São Tomé in great detail.

When the first Portuguese settlers arrived on the uninhabited island in 1485, they almost immediately began sailing to the lands located around the Gulf of Guinea. There they did a brisk business with the African natives, trading Portuguese wares for African gold, ivory, and pepper. They also engaged in a more sinister business: selling African slaves.

Slavery was a part of life for several African tribal nations, so the Portuguese can't be blamed for introducing it to the continent. They did, however, quickly take advantage of the situation. For instance, when the settlers discovered that the soil of São Tomé was good for growing sugarcane, but that the island lacked sufficient manpower for performing all the backbreaking tasks involved with planting and harvesting the crop, the Portuguese solved the problem by importing African slaves from the mainland.

By the 1520s São Tomé had become a busy transit point for slaves bought in the kingdom of Kongo, who were then sold in the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) to Islamic slave traders and to plantation owners on other Portuguese islands. In the 1530s a new market opened up — the Spanish Caribbean — and the transatlantic slave route was set in motion. São Tomé continued to be the hub of this ugly



WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CROCODILES OF "CROCODILE ISLAND"?

Were you to visit São Tomé today, you might have to share your island getaway with lizards, mosquitoes, and sharks, but one thing you wouldn't have to worry about is crocodiles. So why did the Abarbanel write: "... and today we know of an island whose inhabitants are natives of Sefarad and the kingdom of Portugal, and its name is the Island of the Crocodiles"? And what about Samuel Usque, who wrote about "great lizards that swallowed the children"? Were they both deceived by false information? "I asked in São Tomé about the crocodiles and the lizards," says Professor Moshe Liba. The answer he received was: "Here there are only snakes."

Not content with that answer, which contradicted the Jewish sources, Professor Liba searched for more information. He found it in an article that appeared in a 1975 bulletin published by UNICEF, which said: "A sailor that arrived at the island in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries wrote of crocodiles in great number, as well as poisonous serpents. The crocodiles are gone, but the serpents continue to be danger for the plantation workers."

So for once the UN agrees that the Jewish version of a story is correct.

business until the 1570s, when internal turmoil in the kingdom of Kongo forced the Portuguese to move their operations further south.

What does this have to do with the children of São Tomé? For one thing, it shows that the island was hardly an isolated speck on the map. Between the years 1510 and 1540, for example, it is estimated that there were four to six slave ships running continuously between the island and the African mainland.

On the African mainland, those ships would be greeted by *lançados*, middlemen who were at home in both the Portuguese and African languages and culture. *Lançado* is actually a Portuguese word that means "thrown out," and so it should come as no surprise that some of those outcasts were New Christians who had either been exiled to West Africa as punishment for some petty crime, or who had willingly left Portugal in the hope of finding greater freedom on that continent.

During this same time period, São Tomé was building up its sugar industry. In addition to slave labor, the island needed knowledgeable people to act as plantation managers and technicians. According to Professor Hull, those jobs were filled by New Christians, or conversos, from Portugal, who had learned the sugar industry in nearby Madeira and Cape Verde.

Did the children of São Tomé have any contact with these conversos? Were the conversos able to teach the children about Shabbos, or kashrus, or the holidays?

I can already hear Professor Liba warning me to not write nonsense. It seems that many conversos — at least the ones who willingly



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— Professor Norman Simms

came to West Africa — were more interested in making their fortune than in preserving their Jewish traditions. Otherwise, they would have fled to North Africa or the Ottoman Empire, where there were established Jewish communities.

In addition, Professor Liba has told me that Alvaro de Caminha, in letters he sent to Portugal, spoke of the children in the best possible light. The priests also left records that praised the children. This written evidence, which can be found in Lisbon in Portugal's National Archives, seems to prove that the children submitted to their fate, despite the presence of other Portuguese conversos in the area. So, to put it in Professor Liba's words, "As for observing Shabbos and kashrus, you can forget about it."

On the other hand, after 1497 all Iberian Jews, now dubbed New Christians, became masters of deception. With so many conversos wandering up and down the West African coast, was it possible that not one of still had a "Jewish heart" and concerned himself with these children?

To see if there is another way to view the historical record, I turned to Norman Simms, an associate professor at New Zealand's University of Waikato, editor of the scholarly journal *Mentalities/Mentalite*, and the author of an article whose title immediately caught my eye: "Did Any of the Captive Jewish Orphans of São Tomé Ever Leave the Island?"

Caution: Speculation Ahead

"It is a mitzvah for me to help perpetuate the memories of these children," Professor Simms begins, "but first let me say that the history of these Jewish children cannot be proved in a strictly historical way. There is a lot of guess work, but intelligent guess work, I hope. We know they were manumitted, or partly so, in about 1512, on condition that they marry with black slaves and remain on the island. After that, the evidence is patchy, and almost everything I will say is more or less speculation."

He then paints a possible psychological portrait of the children, based upon what we

do know from the records: "These children, the ones who survived the rough treatment and diseases, would be a hardy group. They came from poor and therefore nonprofessional Castilian-Jewish families. Their parents were the Jews who refused to convert. They would have had some Jewish education, and this minimal training would be what they passed on over the next century or so."

So the children were able to hang on to some semblance of their Jewish faith and practices?

"This is very hard to know, because the only way to survive as a secret Jew was to maintain the secrecy. Nevertheless, we know that periodically the Church and the Crown sent to the island inquisitorial agents to root out the Judaizers.

"There also may have been merchants and sailors who passed through who were secret Jews and carried the news back about these children of São Tomé, since there were accounts recorded about their ordeal. These visitors may have brought back some of the 'children' with them. We may also suppose they passed on a little Jewish knowledge and kept the secret community somewhat aware of conditions in Europe and elsewhere in the Portuguese Empire."

Did any of the children ever manage to leave the island?

"It is likely that some of the children — twenty, thirty years later, of course — did leave the island, for we find them arrested by the Inquisition in Italy and charged with Judaizing."

Is there any record of what happened to the children after they grew up?

"The most surprising thing is that by the turn of the seventeenth century, the descendants of the original Jewish slaves almost completely disappear — and reappear in Brazil. The documents state that Jews from São Tomé came to South America to help develop the sugar industry, and Brazil quickly outproduced São Tomé in this regard. Their sugar was also of a higher quality, thanks to the climate and soil."

In the mid-1600s, the Dutch wrested Brazil from Portugal and set up a short-lived colony where Jews were able to live openly as Jews. While some of the conversos might have returned to Judaism, it seems that many did not. Their fears were perhaps justified when Portugal regained control in 1654. According to Professor Simms, the conversos from São Tomé then most likely did one of three things: retreated further into the Brazilian wilderness, where they continued to live as conversos; fled to nearby Surinam and joined a short-lived autonomous Jewish republic in the jungle known as Jodensavanne; or returned to Europe with the Dutch Jews.

Although the historical record agrees with Professor Simms that sometime in the mid-1500s New Christians from São Tomé went to Brazil to help build that country's nascent sugar industry, a new question arises: Who went to Brazil? Were they really the descendants of the children of São Tomé? Or were there other New Christians on the island?

Robert Garfield, author of *A History of São Tomé Island*, believes that the descendants of the children became some of São Tomé's wealthy and powerful plantation owners. So would they have left behind their families and plantations to go off to the wilds of Brazil? Another wrinkle is provided by historian Malyn Newitt, who believes that Portugal continued to use São Tomé as a place of exile for conversos until the year 1535. Indeed, Professor Hull, in his book, claims that by the 1540s, when conversos left São Tomé for Brazil, the conversos were the dominant group on the island. So was it a different group of conversos who went to Brazil — and eventually returned to Europe — while the children's descendants remained in São Tomé?

We will probably never know.

What Remains Today?

When Professor Liba was in São Tomé back in the 1990s, the country's then-prime minister, Miguel Trovoada, said to him, "Ambassador, we have common roots. The Jewish children brought here as slaves from Portugal were the first settlers of this island."

Roots, yes. But what about branches? Does a trace remain of either the Jewish children or their descendants on the island, which is today a mostly poor and very isolated place? Neither Professor Liba nor other scholars are encouraging. It's true that some of the country's approximately 150,000 citizens are light-skinned, but it's just as likely that they are descendants of the Portuguese *degradados* as the conversos. What about physical or cultural traces?

Professor Liba recalls an encounter he had with Bishop Abilio Ribas, who was then the head of the Catholic Church on the island. Professor Liba asked if the Bishop knew where the children were buried — those who had died from malaria or from the crocodiles or snakes. Bishop Ribas replied, "Near the Cathedral."

Bishop Ribas then explained that some twenty years earlier, when the Presidential Palace, which is located next to the Cathedral, was being built, the excavators discovered two things: the sword of Alvaro de Caminha, and the burial place of the Jewish children. Naturally, Professor Liba rushed to the site.

"The story sounded plausible," he recalls. "It's a Christian tradition to have the graveyard near the church. But behind the church there was a small garden — and nothing else. No signs, no graves, no cross, no *matzevah*." Professor Liba adds that he never saw a trace of the sword, either.

During his exploration of the island, Professor Liba did see two Jewish graves located off to one side of São Tomé's main cemetery. However, they date to the late 1800s (the Inquisition was abolished in 1821) and belong to two Moroccans of Portuguese descent, Arão Gabai and Avraham Cohen, who were most likely merchants visiting the island on business.

He also saw a Magen David embedded in the floor of a chapel located near a cocoa plantation called Agua Ize. But as Professor Liba points out, it proves nothing, since a six-pointed star wasn't a uniquely Jewish symbol until fairly recently. A later report of a second Magen David, this one engraved into a pillar, turned out to be a false alarm: it had only five, and not six, points.

Some islanders have said that the influence of the Jewish children can be seen in certain local customs and rituals, particularly in the island's burial customs. However, most scholars agree that if such influences do exist, it's more likely

"Several women threw themselves at the king's feet, begging for permission to accompany their children; but not even this moved the king's pity"

— Samuel Usque, Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel

due to later Jewish and converso settlers. In the opinion of Professor Liba, who has discussed the topic with an expert on the island, "Such claims aren't serious enough to write about in a newspaper."

So what can we say about the children of São Tomé? Although we still know little about their lives, and nothing about their deaths, we can say with some certainty that they never forgot that they were Jews — and that they passed on a stubborn resistance against the Catholic Church to their children. How can such a claim be made?

The historical records tell us that the prejudices that haunted the New Christians in Portugal and elsewhere in Europe eventually found their way to São Tomé. In other words, some of the conversos were accused of being "Judaizers." While some scholars believe that these charges had more to do with financial competition and petty jealousies than any real effort on the part of the conversos to practice the Jewish religion, nonetheless, at least one document from the year 1632 states: "... the island (São Tomé) is so infested with New Christians, that they practice the Jewish rites almost openly" (*L'ancien Congo d'après les archives romaines, 1518-1640*, J. Cuvelier and L. Jardin).

Another document, this one dated April 24, 1691, and written by a local priest named Giuseppe Maria da Busseto, laments, "In this city, which has no bishop, if there are two priests, including the Reverend Father Prefect, they are almost too many, since not many people come to our church."

Professor Simms therefore sums up the children's legacy by saying, "While it is a terrible tragedy — a narrative of slavery, child abuse and religious persecution — it is also an amazing story of Jewish survival in a variety of forms." ■

SÃO TOMÉ TIMELINE

- 1472** Portugal discovers São Tomé
- 1485** First Portuguese settlers arrive
- 1492** Expulsion of Jews from Spain
- 1493** Jewish children exiled to São Tomé
- 1494** Sugar production and slave trade begin
- 1497** All Jews living in Portugal are forcibly baptized
- 1500** Brazil is discovered
- 1506** Massacres of New Christians in Lisbon result in many fleeing to Africa; Crown counts "1,000 residents on the Island"
- 1510s** Jewish children married off to African slaves
- 1540s** New Christians from São Tomé go to Brazil to help with its sugar production
- 1550s** By now most plantations owners on São Tomé are of mixed race
- 1570s** Filipe de Nis (formerly Solomon Marcus), a Portuguese New Christian active in the slave trade during the 1550s-1570s, is accused of Judaizing by jealous Old Christians on the island; he later returns to Europe, where he is arrested by the Italian Inquisition
- 1580s** Sugar production begins to decline, due to competition from Brazil
- 1623** Bishop Francisco de Soveral is sent to São Tomé to "eliminate the many Jews there" and on the West African mainland
- 1800s** After cocoa is introduced in the early 1800s, São Tomé becomes one of the world's largest cocoa producers
- 1975** The islands of São Tomé and Príncipe gain their independence from Portugal
- 1995** International conference on the Jewish children of São Tomé held on the island
- 2003** Oil deposits are discovered off the coast
- 2010** São Tomé opens tenders for oil exploitation

